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Is Learned Helplessness Helpless? Political Language of the Bush Administration

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Title: Is Learned Helplessness Helpless? Political Language of the Bush Administration

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Abstract. This article critiques the notion that the Bush administration has effectively pursued its policy prescriptions through public language that induces learned helplessness among United States citizens.

Brooks (June 30, 2003) has posited in *The Nation* that “Bush is a master at inducing learned helplessness in the electorate: his language makes people feel they cannot solve their problems” (p. 21). In making her case, Brooks cites the work of psychologist Martin Seligman as to the nature of learned helplessness and its causes. In fact, the language of President Bush and his representatives does not employ or reflect the empirically validated causes of learned helplessness, nor is learned helplessness characteristic of large segments of the United States citizenry.

Seligman and his associates have long cited three continua of cognitive attributions that may induce learned helplessness. These continua comprise whether the cause of noxious events is internal or external to the individual in question, is stable or unstable in nature, and is constrained to specific aspects of reality or to reality in its global sense. The more the cause of noxious events is construed as external, stable, and global, the more learned helplessness may be induced (cf. Alloy et al., 1984; Peterson & Seligman, 1983).

However, the language ascribed to Bush that is cited by Brooks may be interpreted in many ways quite different than external, stable, and global. For example, “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen” may be interpreted as internal because Americans (or at least their representatives) are fighting the campaign and the choice of fighting or not fighting may presumably have an impact on and control of the nature of the threat. “I know many citizens have fears tonight” may be interpreted as unstable because of the logical inference that many others may not have such fears. “Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists” may be interpreted as specific because the threat is not everywhere from everywhere and everyone. One might also note that—although not germane to learned helplessness research—the above quotes may be interpreted as positive rather than the negativism imputed by Brooks. The duration and character of the threat is knowable. Fear is understandable. The specifics of the threat are known.

More importantly, learned helplessness as a psychological phenomenon is often characterized as leading to outright clinical depression, the belief that one’s behavior will have no effect on the threat at hand, or no behavior whatsoever in the presence of the threat (cf. Buchanan, 1995; Overmier, 1998; Seligman, 1974). Yet there do not seem to be any national epidemiological warnings of sudden spikes in depression, and one might as easily infer that the many public opponents of Bush’s national security policy might be acting as if they believe their opposition matters than as if they are merely whistling in the dark.

It seems, then, that Brooks’s take on Bush’s language may reflect a misapplication of the learned helplessness construct. It might even reflect a relatively common phenomenon of behavioral scientists seeking psychological theory and data to support already developed political opinions—a phenomenon

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analogous to seeking intelligence to support an already made decision to go to war. Identification with the aggressor? Maybe. Learned helplessness, probably not. (See Alloy, L. B., Peterson, C., Abramson, L. Y., & Seligman, M. E. (1984). Attributional style and the generality of learned helplessness. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 46, 681-687; Brooks, R. (June 30, 2003). A nation of victims. *The Nation*. pp. 20-22; Buchanan, G. M., & Seligman, M. E. P. (1995). Explanatory style. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.; Overmier, J.B. (1998). Learned helplessness: State or stasis of the art? In M. Sabourin & F. Craik (Eds.). *Advances in psychological science, Vol. 2: Biological and cognitive aspects*. (pp. 301-315). Taylor & Francis; Peterson, C., & Seligman, M.E. (1983). Learned helplessness and victimization. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 103-116; Seligman, M.E.P. (1974). Depression and learned helplessness. In R.J. Friedman & M.M. Katz, (Eds.). *The psychology of depression: Contemporary theory and research*. John Wiley & Sons.) (Keywords: Language, Learned Helplessness, National Security Policy)